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Restaurant Business

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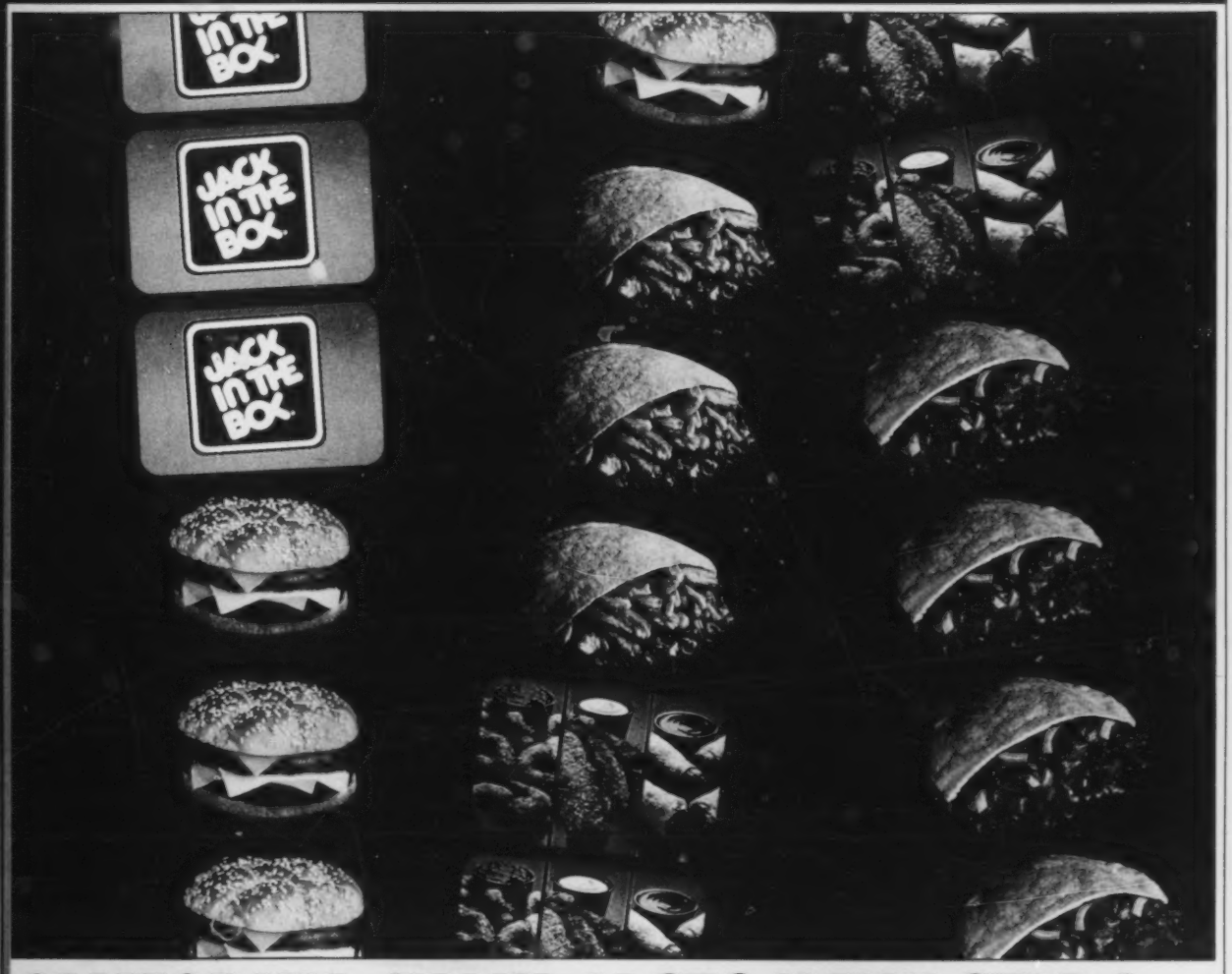

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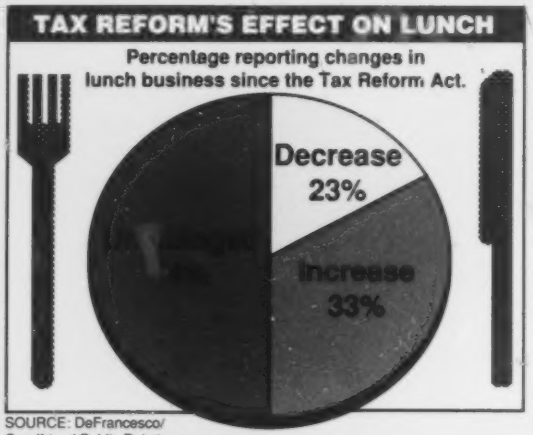
BUSINESS BAROMETER

The Hard Facts Shaping Our Industry

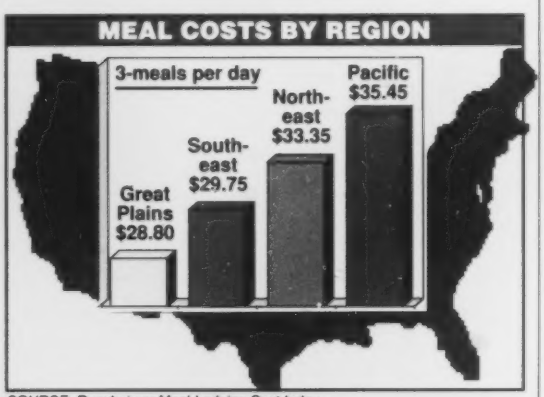
By Howard Riell


TAX REFORM'S EFFECT ON LUNCH
Percentage reporting changes in lunch business since the Tax Reform Act.
Decrease 23%
Increase 33%

SOURCE: DeFrancesco/ Goodfriend Public Relations survey

Luncheon Diners Remain Untaxed

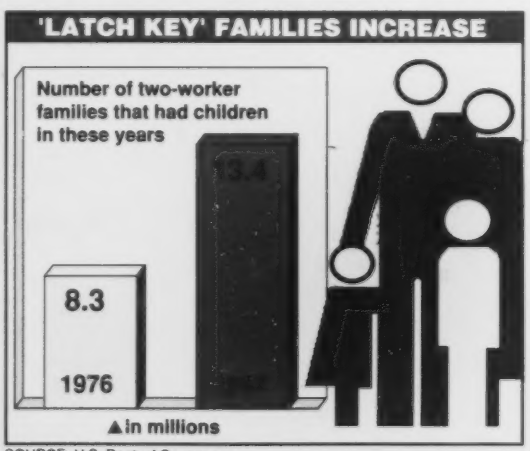
Were fears that business-meal trade would suffer under the Tax Reform Act of 1986 unfounded? The answer is no—but they apparently were exaggerated. A full 77% of operators responding to a DeFrancesco/Goodfriend survey conducted at the National Restaurant Association show said lunch business has either increased or stayed the same in the year and a half since the act's inception, which curtailed business meal deductions by 20%. The average volume increase reported is 14%. The 23% who reported a decrease averaged a 16.4% drop-off.



SOURCE: Runzheimer Meal-Lodging Cost Index

Great Plains For Great Prices

The Great Plains states—Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota—can feed travelers three squares a day cheaper than any other region of the U.S., according to the Runzheimer Meal-Lodging Cost Index. The Northeast and Pacific states were the most expensive. Operators who are also aggressive marketers may take note of several of Runzheimer's money-saving tips to travelers. Among them: Eat in the suburbs rather than the city and use restaurants outside your hotel.



SOURCE: U.S. Dept. of Commerce

More Families Needing More Foodservice

Last year, there were 5.1 million more children born to families in which both parents work than in 1976. Such families are a relatively recent demographic category whose growth shows no sign of abating. The category is also, of course, a vital ingredient of the convenience trend sweeping all segments of the foodservice industry. Such families have no time to cook, hungry little mouths to feed, and a taste for the ease, speed, and relative price/value of take-out and delivery food. More than 1.9 million of the two-worker-with-kids families are composed of two college-educated parents.

CHARTS DESIGNED BY SHARI FANG

RESTAURANT BUSINESS

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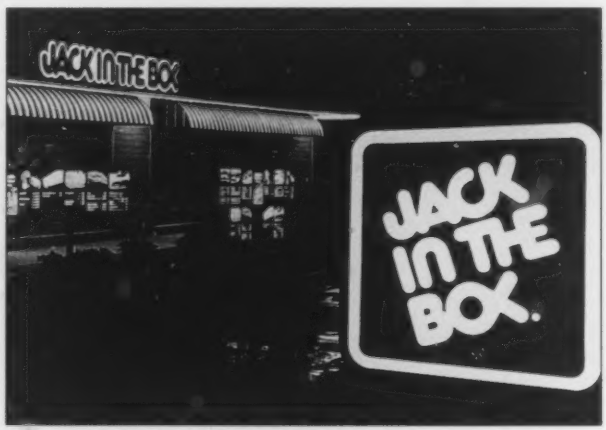

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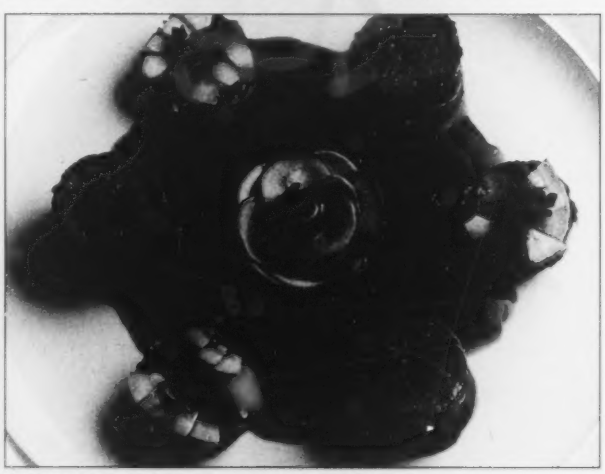

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MENU MANAGEMENT **JACK IN THE BOX.** *A top-performing menu has meant nothing less than profit magic for this San Diego-based chain. Since 1980—when Jack In The Box moved outside of the traditional fast-food market—the chain has pursued an older, more affluent customer with unique, upscale menu items aimed at the frequent user. This strategy of menu management has helped Jack In The Box achieve a 14% increase in average sales for company-owned stores, and should help push the chain to 1,400 units in the next six to seven years* **105**

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SPECIAL OFFER

Restaurant Business now has available specially prepared reprints of the **1987 RESTAURANT GROWTH INDEX** and the **1988 MAJOR FORCES IN FRANCHISING.** These annual studies are invaluable reference tools.

The reprints are available for $5 per copy. Direct orders and inquiries to: Editor Peter Berlinski, *Restaurant Business* Magazine, 633 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

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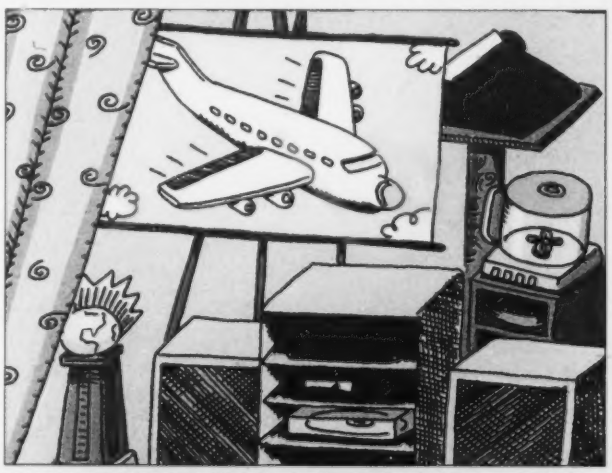

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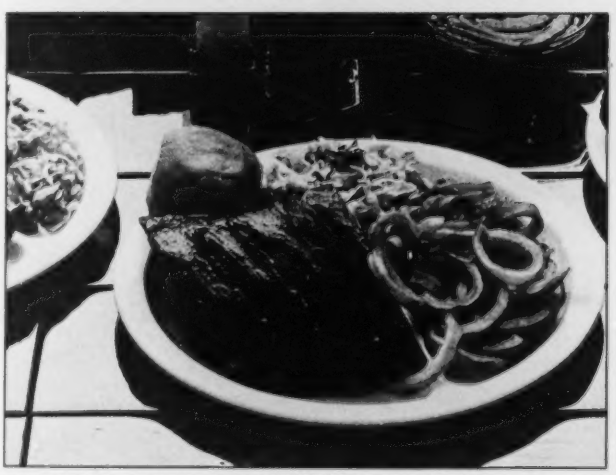

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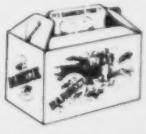

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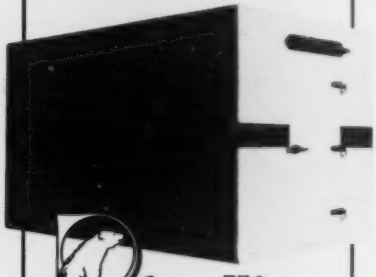

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BBQ/COUNTRY COOKIN'

Barbecued ribs and country-style cooking are showing up on more and more mainstream menus.

BY JACQUE KOCHAK

Both barbecue and country cooking share roots tangled in the history of the American South. Their popularity is enduring and assured in the regions of their birth, yet so far few chains specializing in these styles of cooking have been able to exploit their appeal and take either barbecue or country cooking much beyond those areas. What has happened, however, is that both barbecued ribs and country-style cooking are showing up on more and more mainstream menus.

"All different types of places are serving dishes like country-fried steak," says Andy Revella, executive chef for Dallas-based Bennigan's, which recently rolled out a "Country Cookin" menu. The section includes country-fried chicken priced at $6.45, country-fried steak priced at $6.95, and catfish fingers priced at $6.75.

The National Rib Cook-off takes place every spring in Cleveland, and this year attracted some 200,000 people to sample the ribs from 40 restaurants around the country and as far

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Jacque Kochak is a freelance writer who specializes in foodservice. She is based in White Plains, NY.

Ribby's Express Barbecue features hickory-smoked barbecued ribs and sandwiches prepared in an authentic wood-burning smoker.

Barbecue and country cooking are still very much the province of independent operators.

away as Australia. Gary Jacobs, president of the National Rib Cook-Off, says, "Between 1982 and 1986 I saw an explosion in the segment, with barbecue shacks opening everywhere and a lot of restaurants putting ribs on their menu." He believes that the appetite for barbecue will continue to grow.

MANY INDEPENDENTS. Barbecue and country cooking are still very much the province of independents. Carson's in Chicago is a barbecue legend. Minneapolis' upscale Rudolph's gets raves for ribs. And then there are the longtime barbecue specialists, the places that may be short on atmosphere but are long on good food, and plenty of it.

Sonny Bryan's in Dallas and The Goode Co. in Houston have their loyal followings. Bessenger's in Columbia, SC, and the Lexington BBQ in Lexington, NC, serve up their own regional style of barbecue. The Swingin' Door is well known in Richmond, TX, and Southwest in Houston turns out pecan-wood-smoked ribs.

There are those who swear that Arthur Bryant's in Kansas City smokes the best barbecue in the country, and the Hickory Log in tiny Dexter, MO, draws customers from as far away as St. Louis and Memphis.

The independents are so strong that until recently there has been no serious attempt to expand a barbecue concept on a chain basis. That is slowly changing as new technology makes the barbecue process faster and less labor-intensive. It also requires less skill.

RIB CHAIN. Dallas-based USACafes, franchisor of some 600 Bonanza Family Restaurants, is banking on the popularity of ribs, and at the same time trying to exploit the growing popularity of take-out convenience with its Ribby's Express Barbecue concept.

Two Ribby's opened last year in Dallas, and a third store opened earlier this year in Chicago. A fourth store was under construction at press time. According to USACafes president Jeff Rogers, Ribby's will open in Kansas City, San Diego, and Sacramento.

Ribby's features hickory-smoked barbecue beef and pork ribs, barbecued ribs, and sandwiches prepared in an authentic wood-burning barbecue smoker. Sandwiches include Ribby's "Rib-B-Cue," beef brisket, smoked ham, a combo, and a chicken sandwich.

In designing the menu, USACafes took regional preferences into consideration. For example, several different recipes for beans, coleslaw, chopped and shredded pork sandwiches, and barbecue sauces are available to franchisees. Baby back ribs can be added to the menu if desired.

Prices are reasonable; four-rib dinners cost $4.99, six ribs are $6.59, and a family pack serving three to four people is $15.99. Dinners include beans, coleslaw, and dinner rolls. A whole chicken costs $6.99, and a pound of beef brisket also sells for $6.99. A small smoked ham sandwich costs $1.99, and a regular smoked ham sandwich costs $2.99. The Rib-B-Cue, which

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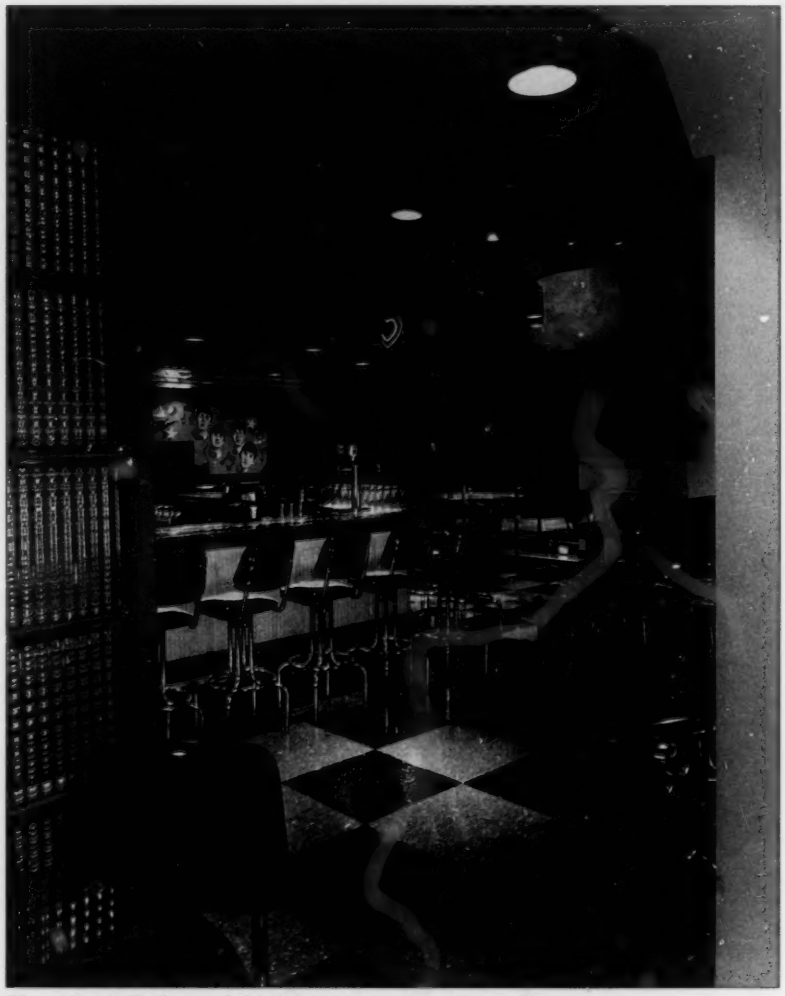

Heartthrob Cafes, a nightclub concept, focuses on ribs.

is chopped barbecued pork with spices, is priced at $2.79.

CONVENIENCE. Ribby's offers no inside seating. All service is drive-thru or via delivery. In fact, delivery service, modeled on Domino's Pizza, is a crucial part of the operation. Right now, delivery generates about 30% of sales, but that continues to grow. Target is 40% of sales from delivery. Average delivery check at lunch is $10 to $12, and $14 to $18 at dinner. As many as 25% of drive-thru orders command a high check as well, says Rogers. For that reason, Ribby's accepts credit cards.

Franchising will be strictly on a territorial basis, so that market penetration can be achieved quickly. Ribby's gives USACafes' area developers a vehicle for expansion in markets with no room for more Bonanzas.

The Ribby's building is prefabricated and costs about $140,000 to construct, about one-sixth the price of a typical Bonanza restaurant. The 434-sq.-ft. kiosk offers two drive-thru windows and one walk-up window and serves a neighborhood delivery market within eight minutes' driving time.

TRADITIONAL CHAIN. Gainesville, FL-based Sonny's Bar-B-Q was the first of the truly traditional "barbecue barns" to become a chain presence. The company continues its march out of its home state, with 76 franchised units in the Southeast. Another seven units will open this year. Florida is still the company's citadel, however; 55 of the company's 76 units are located there.

Total systemwide sales for Sonny's in 1987 reached about $68 million, with average unit volumes of $900,000. According to Bill Arnold, the company's director of franchise development, sales have been up every year since the chain was founded 20 years ago, except for a brief period in the late '70s.

Sonny's units have a country-and-western decor and wooden benches. Exteriors carry out the down-home feel with shutters and pillars.

Sonny's style of barbecue seems to be acceptable in many parts of the South, despite regional differences. The restaurants use pork, beef, and chicken, and the barbecued meat is sliced rather than chopped. The sauce is tomato-based.

"Regional tastes have been a little bit of a handicap, especially in the Carolinas," says Arnold. "But we advertise quality and value. We don't ask customers to give up their local style of barbecue. We can share the market." For a couple of the units opened outside of Florida, the first year or so of operation was difficult, Arnold notes. But Sonny's consistently high-quality food at a good price (average check is $10) turned customers around.

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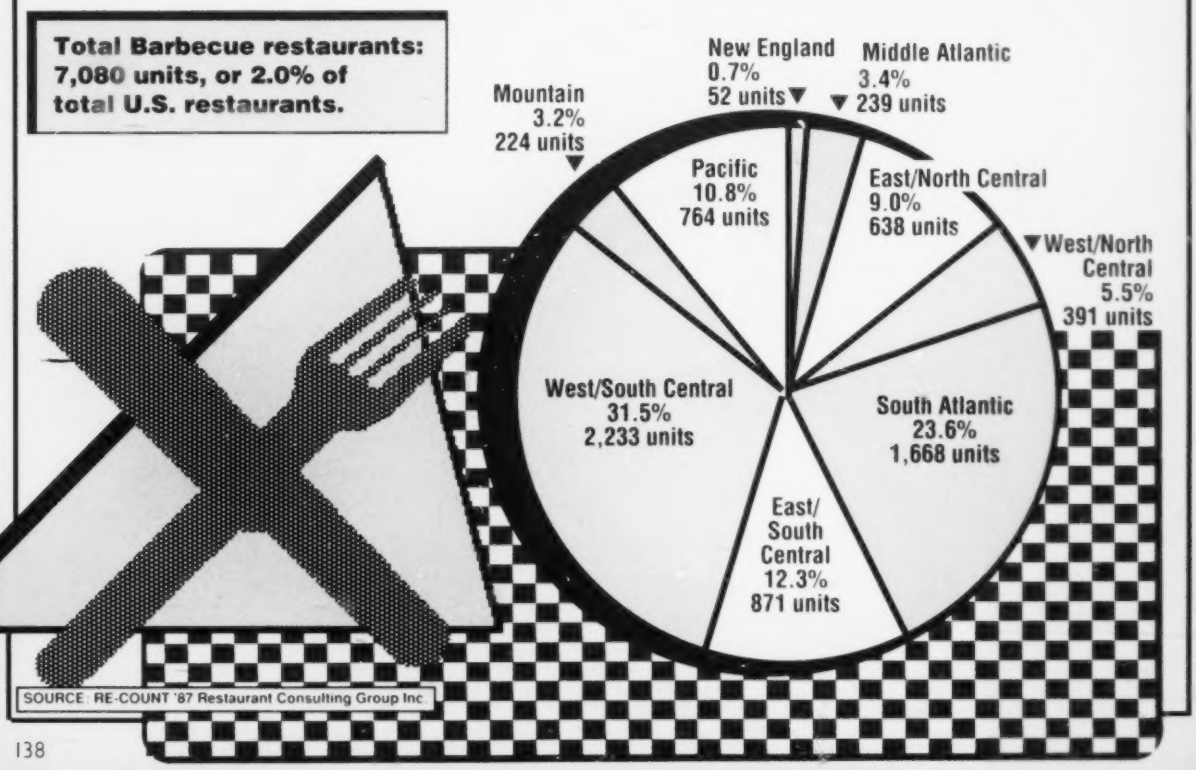
SOUTH LICKS CHOPS OVER RIBS

Distribution of Barbecue Restaurants by U.S. Census Regions


Total Barbecue restaurants: 7,080 units, or 2.0% of total U.S. restaurants.
New England 0.7% 52 units
Middle Atlantic 3.4% 239 units
Mountain 3.2% 224 units
Pacific 10.8% 764 units
East/North Central 9.0% 638 units
West/North Central 5.5% 391 units
West/South Central 31.5% 2,233 units
South Atlantic 23.6% 1,668 units
East/South Central 12.3% 871 units

SOURCE: RE-COUNT '87 Restaurant Consulting Group Inc

CHART BY SHARI FANG

Regional preferences for barbecue make it difficult for chains to expand.

Another Florida-based barbecue chain is Fat Boy Bar-B-Q, with headquarters in Cocoa. The company now has 41 units (all but two are franchised), primarily located in Florida, with some scattered in Ohio and the Bahamas. The company is in the process of negotiating a multi-unit franchising contract in St. Louis, and is discussing franchising with a group in Pennsylvania.

QUICK BBQ. Of particular interest is Fat Boy's new fast-food concept. One unit is open in Bloomfield, OH (just south of Columbus), and one is in Port Charlotte, FL, near Ft. Myers. The fast-food units do business under the same name and offer the same barbecue menu as full-service units, but such items as steaks and seafood have been eliminated. The fast-food units seat 64, compared to 167 for a full-service unit, and can be built for about 85% of the cost of a full-service unit, says Jay Bradley, Fat Boy's executive vice president.

Both units are so new that no sales projections have been determined, although the Port Charlotte store grossed $6,800 on its first day, says Bradley. About 50% of sales for both units are generated through the drive-thru, he adds.

"I think these two units are a good test pad, because one is in Florida and one is out of state," Bradley says. "We're not going to push franchise sales until we are sure that the concept is going to be successful, but our gut feeling is that it's working."

The full-service Fat Boy Bar-B-Q will continue to be the main focus, Bradley stresses. The restaurants offer a broad menu that rarely changes, with emphasis on steak and barbecued pork, beef, chicken, and pork ribs. Average check at breakfast is $3.50, at lunch $4.70, and at dinner $8.

Barbecued meats are prepared by pre-smoking in a basting sauce using a mechanized smoker, then finished off in an open pit. The same method is used at the two fast-food units.

Bradley says that sales throughout the system have been holding steady. About half the units are showing small gains, most of the remainder are showing flat sales, and top units in Cocoa, Orlando, Merit Island, and Kissimmee are posting gains of up to 10%.

ENTERTAINING FARE. Ribs are a mainstay on the menu at trendy Heartthrob Cafes in Chicago, Nashville, St. Paul, Philadelphia, and Kansas City. The restaurants, owned by Chicago-based Heartthrob Enterprises Inc., exist on the same 10,000-sq.-ft. premises as a nightclub called Philadelphia Bandstand.

Heartthrob Cafes have won local "Best Ribs" awards in Philadelphia and Nashville. "Coming from Chicago, I was brought up on ribs," says president Larry Spatz. "I knew our ribs had to be good." The big sellers on the menu are I Want My Baby Back Ribs and Eatie Gourmet Burgers.

The average unit volume of the cafe/nightclub combinations is $4 million, says Spatz. The food is low-priced and varied. Average lunch check is $6, average dinner check $11. And a giant buffet served every weeknight from 5 p.m. until 8 p.m. is free.

Heartthrob Enterprises opened its first restaurant in Philadelphia two and a half years ago. Leases have been signed for Heartthrob Cafe/Philadel-

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Bob Evans Farms is not positioning itself as "country."

phia Bandstand combinations in Hollywood and San Jose, CA, and New York.

Another new barbecue concept aiming at expansion is K.C. Masterpiece, which is based in Kansas City. The concept was developed by Rich Davis. Davis was a backyard cook who concocted his K.C. Masterpiece barbecue sauce, which he bottled and retailed.

Davis sold his sauce-bottling operation and opened the first K.C. Masterpiece restaurant in February 1987 in the city's booming western suburbs. A second unit is planned for St. Louis, with long-term plans to open between 10 and 20 K.C. Masterpiece restaurants, all company-owned, in the next several years.

K.C. Masterpiece serves authentic barbecue in an upscale atmosphere. A closed-pit hickory smoker is visible from the dining room. The smoker turns out spareribs, baby back ribs, brisket, pork tenderloin, boneless prime rib roast, and barbecued smoked sausage. Even the meatballs that are served as an appetizer are barbecued.

An open pecan-wood grill, also visible from the dining room, grills fresh seafood, shrimp, Kansas City steaks, and chicken. All food is made from scratch, from potato salad and coleslaw to the smoked cheddar-cheese dressing for salads. K.C. Masterpiece offers a diversity of regional types of barbecue; the menu even features a Carolina-style sandwich doused with vinegar and spices.

K.C. Masterpiece's atmosphere is informal but still a long way from a typical barbecue barn. The dining room is large and open, decorated with beiges, rusts, and oranges for a comfortable, woodsy feeling. Lighting is soft and indirect, and handmade tin tiles grace recessed ceiling areas. Walls are decorated with barbecue-themed pictures.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES. Although ribs have become popular all over the country, the true smoky barbecue that purists love is still primarily a regional phenomenon. Slow-cooked barbecue is gaining fans outside of the South.

"Our customer base has grown to the point that we are seriously considering opening another restaurant," says Mark Strassburg, owner with his wife Connie of a barbecue restaurant called Memphis Pig-Out. Memphis Pig-Out is located in the resort community of Atlantic Highlands, NJ.

The Strassburgs went into the barbecue business because they missed their favorite foods from their hometown. Connie Strassburg hails from Memphis, and the 165-seat restaurant specializes in Memphis-style pulled pork and barbecued baby back ribs as well as half chickens. Hickory-smoked spare ribs sell for $8.95 and $10.95, and baby back ribs for $12.95. Hickory-smoked pork filet is priced at $8.95, charbroiled pork kabob is priced at $8.95, and hickory-smoked pulled pork

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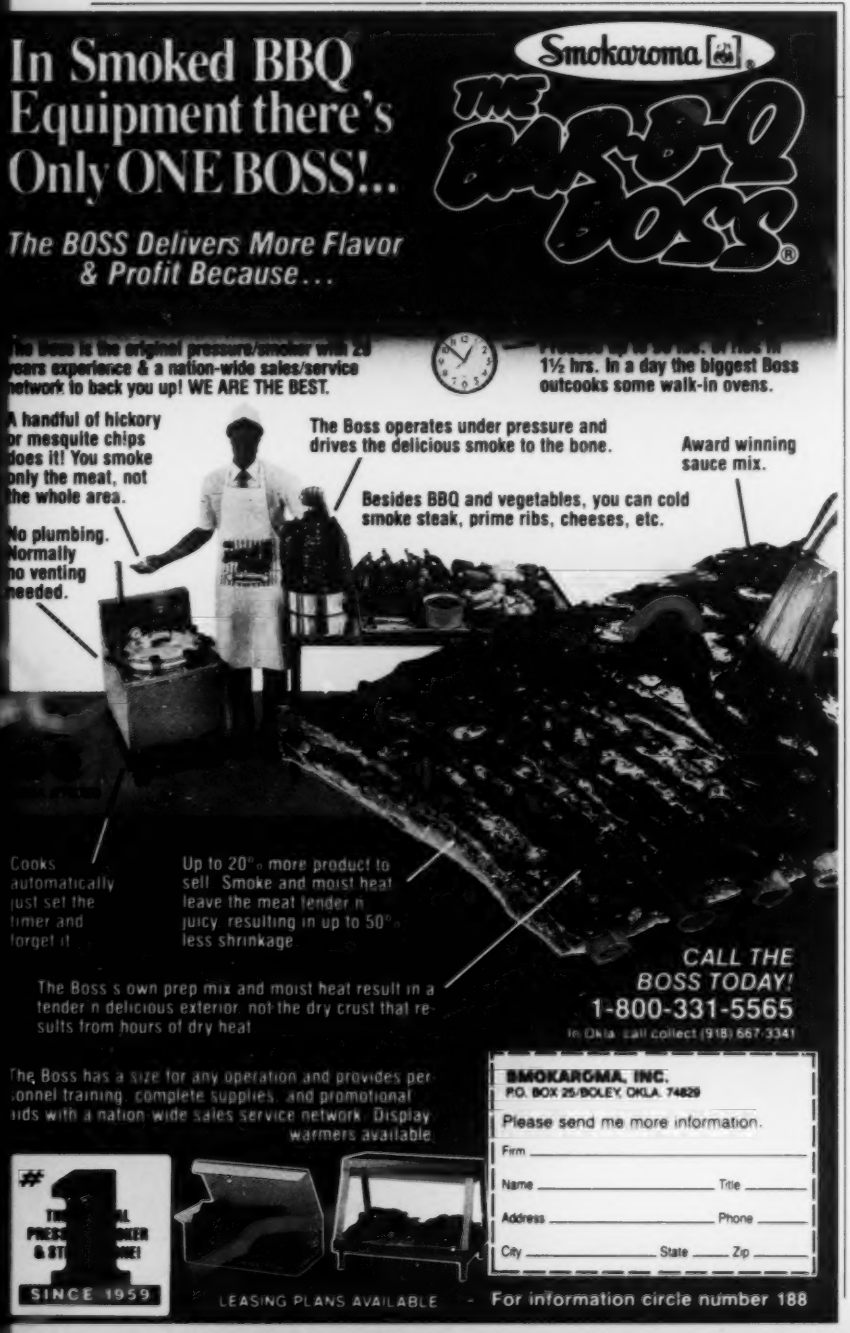
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is priced at $8.95. Also available are such entrees as lobster tails, flounder stuffed with crab, and steaks.

Takeout accounts for 12% of sales, with spare ribs in bulk selling for $8.50 a pound, baby back ribs for $10.50 a rack, a whole chicken for $9.50 and a half chicken for $5, and pulled pork for $10 a pound.

COUNTRY COOKING. The largest chain identified with country-style cooking is Columbus, OH-based Bob Evans Farms, with 201 company-owned units and sales for the fiscal year ended April 29 of $259 million (average unit volume is $1.4 million). However, Bob Evans does not want to be labeled as a country-cooking concept. "When you say country cooking, you get polarized perceptions from the public," says Roger Williams, vice president of marketing. "To some customers, country cooking means 'good cooking, down-home, a little nostalgic,' while others say, 'Country cooking's not for me, country cooking is heavy, we don't want it.' Bob Evans wants to incorporate all the positives and none of the negatives; the word 'country' is not used in its advertising."

Bob Evans appeals to families. It has a broad menu that includes such popular homestyle offerings as meat loaf, country-fried steak, and chunks of chicken with dumpling-style noodles.

The company recently introduced a repositioned dinner menu, with seven entrees priced under $5. "We had allowed our menu items and prices to get into the $6 to $9 range, and we wanted to pay more attention to the heavy users of family restaurants—families with children. Now we're working on a children's program."

Bob Evans Farms is expanding at a steady rate, with plans to build 23 new units in 1988, all in present trade areas except for a new unit in Frederick, MD, the company's first move into the Northeast. The company has one Owens Family Restaurant in Texas, and three more will be built this year.

Bob Evans has taken its country-style family restaurant into the large urban market of Chicago. At first the going was rough. "Chicago has been a problem market," says Williams. "We had a strong breakfast business but a very weak dinner business. However, sales are becoming stronger and stronger. We've made a heavy investment in advertising and been a little aggressive on remodels. Muffins and omelets have been added."

Williams says that he doesn't expect to see a great proliferation of country concepts. "The thing against country concepts is their nutritional perception," he says. "They're always going to be around, but I don't expect them to be the next big boom."

continued on page 148

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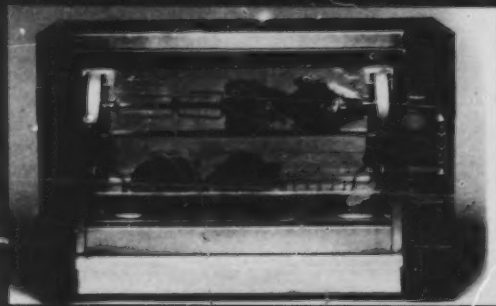

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Po Folks' check average is now about $4.70, but company executives hope to see that pushed to $5 or more.

A large chain sitting squarely in the country-cooking niche is Nashville-based Po Folks, with 160 units in 22 states. Thirty-six units are company-owned. Total systemwide sales in 1987 reached $176 million, with average unit volumes of $1.1 million.

Units are located primarily in the South, Southwest, and Midwest, but two Po Folks are open in Sacramento, CA, and restaurants will open soon in Los Angeles and San Diego.

SATURATION? Po Folks' sales have been flat for some time. "We're not expecting any big sales growth," says Mike McNeil, director of marketing. "What's in the future? We're in a mature market, we're reaching a saturation point, and we're going to have to get away from low check averages."

McNeil says that Po Folks' check average is now about $4.70, but company executives hope to see that pushed to $5 or more. The increase won't come through high-priced menu items, however, he says. Po Folks recently introduced a pulled pork barbecue sandwich and dinner, and a meat loaf is in test. Strawberry shortcake also has been rolled out.

Dallas-based The Black-eyed Pea is a subsidiary of Great Britain's Unigate PLC, a conglomerate that also owns the Taco Bueno fast-food Mexican chain and the Casa Bonita Mexican dinner houses. Black-eyed Pea unit volumes range from $500,000 a year to $2 million, depending on the size.

A total of 50 Black-eyed Peas are now open, along with five Dixie Houses. They all serve American homestyle cooking such as fresh vegetables, fresh-baked whole wheat rolls, smothered steak, chicken divan, liver and onions, pot roast, meat loaf, and pork chops. Black-eyed Pea recently added charbroiled chopped steak to the menu along with chicken fingers and honey-mustard sauce. Also new are two meal-sized salads.

The company is continuing slow expansion, with construction underway right now in the northern Virginia and southern Maryland markets around Washington, DC. Other units are located in Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado.

PRICE/VALUE. Black-eyed Pea restaurants are known for their good price/value relationship, with an average check of about $6. Restaurants are located in suburban neighborhoods rather than along highways or in malls.

"We see this as a very viable niche," says Susan Lugeanbeal, assistant vice president of marketing. "But we don't think of this as country cooking. We think of it as American homestyle cooking, and we were doing it long before it was chic."

As Black-eyed Pea moved out of its Dallas home base into the Washington, DC, market, the company expected that menus would have to be regionalized, says Lugeanbeal. "We did focus groups and found out that we didn't really have to regionalize menus, but we're prepared for the future."

Lebanon, TN-based Cracker Barrel Restaurants, with 60 units strung along interstates in the Southeast, is among the highest-volume country concepts with per-unit sales averaging $2 million. Total sales in 1987 passed $99 million.

"We just reported our third quarter, and same-store sales are up a little more than 7%," says senior vice president of finance and chief financial officer Jimmie D. White. "We've been showing real increases for 13 straight quarters."

COUNTRY MOTIF. Cracker Barrel Restaurants use an old country store motif, and a gift store in each unit does a thriving business. Restaurants average 176 seats.

Average check is $4.80. The most expensive item on the menu is a 10-oz. steak for $8.95. Country dinner plates are $4.45; the customer chooses from entrees including a hamburger steak, country ham, chicken breast filet, hickory-smoked pork barbecue, sugar-cured ham, chicken and dumplings, farm-raised catfish filet, and charbroiled pork chop. The dinners come with homemade buttermilk biscuits or corn muffins as well as two vegetables. "Fancy Fixin's," for $6.59, are larger versions of the same dinners.

Breakfast is popular at Cracker Barrels. Pancakes are served with real maple syrup or fried apples, and biscuits and gravy accompany egg offerings.

THE FUTURE. Country-cooking concepts are moving away from their roots to broaden appeal. This repositioning puts them in competition with family restaurants, but also enhances expansion.

For a barbecue chain to succeed, it has to be flexible enough to adapt to regional preferences. But the appeal of barbecue can be clearly seen in its adoption onto many menus in other segments. This bodes well for growth within the segment.

MENU IDEAS

Build a Better Bread Basket

BY SCOTT ALLMENDINGER

For thousands of years, bread has represented success and well-being. The staff of life is a religious symbol, and "bread" is also a latter-day slang word for money. Perhaps if Marie Antoinette had better understood its value, she might not have lost her head.

Despite its fundamental importance, many American restaurateurs have treated bread as an afterthought in the past. A mediocre product was often served, in an effort to slice a few pennies off the "K" factor—the contribution of complimentary items to food cost. Now, however, restaurateurs are rising to the challenge of competition by creating signature bread service and bread-based menu items that appeal to the public's current taste for fuller-flavored and fresh fare.

FIRST IMPRESSION. In restaurants serving bread with meals, the bread forms the first taste impression in the mind of the guest. It is important because it makes a strong opening statement about the food to follow. Stale bread or bread dried out from too much time in the warmer will definitely get the meal off to a start from which it might not recover, and nondescript bread can signal the diner that the rest of the meal might be just as boring. For a relatively low cost, creative bread baskets can be built with purchased or baked-on-premise products.

The Union Square Cafe in New York City, for example, offers an assortment of breads purchased from an off-premise bakery. Included in its baskets are sourdough rye, a French baguette, and a crisp, unleavened garlic- and salt-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON KUSHNIRCK; FOODSTYLING BY SCOTT ALLMENDINGER.

Bread basket building blocks—including baskets made of bread—come from a variety of sources in all sizes, flavors, and shapes to enhance table service and buffet presentations.

MENU IDEAS

FRENCH/ITALIAN PROVES POPULAR

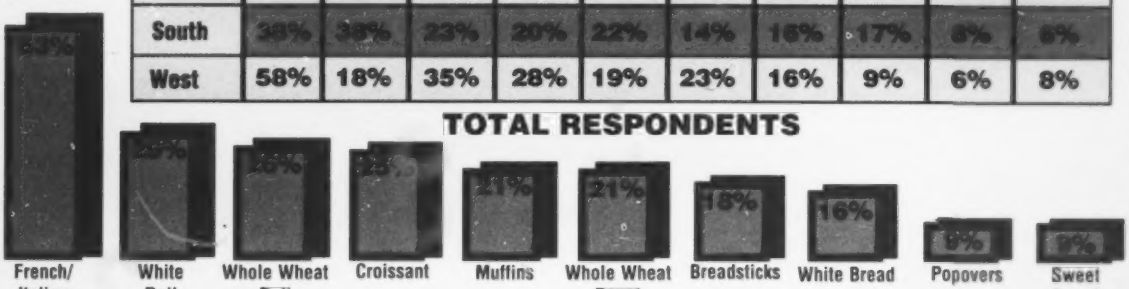
BREAD PREFERENCES

When bread is served with a restaurant meal, which of the breads listed on this card would you like to have?

BY REGION

	French/ Italian	White Roll	Whole Wheat Roll	Croissant	Muffins	Whole Wheat Bread	Bread-sticks	White Bread	Popovers	Sweet Bread
East	63%	27%	21%	24%	19%	19%	21%	15%	13%	11%
Midwest	53%	28%	29%	28%	25%	31%	21%	21%	10%	12%
South	38%	38%	23%	20%	22%	14%	16%	17%	8%	8%
West	58%	18%	35%	28%	19%	23%	16%	9%	6%	8%

TOTAL RESPONDENTS



SOURCE: Gallup Organization

CHART BY SHARI FANG

flavored flatbread. Michela's in Cambridge, MA, bakes *grissini*, Italian yeast breads made long and thin by cutting the dough on the fettuccine setting of a pasta machine, in its own bakeshop. The *grissini* are placed directly on the tabletop, and guests tear off as much as they please. Chicago-based Hyatt Hotels Corporation recently announced that buttermilk biscuits and "gooey cinnamon rolls" would be the cornerstone of its new weekend country breakfast promotion, and in the fast-food segment, Rax Restaurants Inc. of Columbus features whole 6-inch French loaves. "The mini baguettes lose their romance when they're cut," says Rax executive vice president of marketing Dan Corrigan, "so we leave them whole to allow families to literally break bread together."

The American Bounty restaurant at the Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, NY, is setting the standard for contemporary bread service. The student-operated restaurant features a 14-day cycle menu of 20 breads, six of which are served each day. Yeast breads such as cottage cheese dill bread are made in the CIA's bakeshop classes, while quick breads leavened with baking powder, such as corn sticks and panfried Navajo bread, are made in the American Bounty's display kitchen.

RISING AWARENESS. The CIA's baking and pastry department chairman Noble Masi, a certified executive pastry chef, teaches bread seminars around the country for the National Restaurant Association, and reports a heightened awareness among attendees regarding signature breads. "Bread is so important throughout the meal," says Masi. "It's the first thing the customers eat, and they continue to eat it in between courses. Many restaurateurs spend a lot of time on their entrees and appetizers, but fall down when it comes to the bread. We feel that to make the dining concept complete, the breads have to be as entertaining as the meal." Guests at the American Bounty find the bread delicious as well as entertaining, since they consume 2½ to 3 units per cover, nearly twice the average.

The Bounty admittedly enjoys an advantage over most operators in that it draws from a free labor pool and has access to the CIA's noteworthy bakeshops. Yet according to Masi, many restaurants can follow its lead. "If someone doesn't have an entire baking program like we do, they should offer one or two really good products instead of 20. There are a lot of dough products on the market to which they can add their own identity. Also, a bakery might give them a break on price if the restaurant gives them printed credit on their menu."

At the Buckhorn Exchange, an 85-seat Denver restaurant, bread service has "always been loaves, never rolls," according to general manager Bill Dutton. "We serve hearty portions of food, and people love to pick up the bread and rip off big hunks with their hands."

BREAD AND BUTTER. The Buckhorn Exchange serves a French-style baguette and a six-grain rye bread, both of which are cut into 5-inch sections, then sliced about three-quarters of the way through. The bread is served room temperature in old-fashioned gold-mining pans that reinforce the casual theme and reflect the heritage of the area. Dutton figures that bread-and-butter service adds 25¢ to 30¢ to the restaurant's K factor, based on a wholesale price of 75¢ for a 24-inch baguette and 95¢ for a 16-oz. rye loaf.

Los Altos, CA-based Stuart Anderson's Black Angus restaurants switched to a nine-grain wheat loaf chainwide about two years ago. As di-

MENU IDEAS

BREAD-BUYING GUIDE

Operators have many options to consider when making bread-service improvements, but the primary choice is between on-premise baking and purchasing from an outside source. Each process has its pros and cons.

The popularity of on-premise baking or finishing of product is growing rapidly in all segments as manufacturers make simultaneous advancements in convenience and quality. No longer is it necessary to pay for separate staff, equipment, or square footage to get into the baking game, and the benefits are many. On-premise baking, in addition to its public relations value, offers control over freshness, flexibility, consistency, and amount of product.

Some operators even move baking to the front of the house to take advantage of the enticing aromas and visual images it offers; the expense involved can be as low as the cost of a countertop convection oven and an extra employee shift. The downside of on-premise baking is that in properties restricted in space, labor, or equipment, volume baking or finishing of product can still create a bottleneck during service or prep time.

Convenience products for baking are available in three basic forms that require varying levels of labor intensity. Dry mixes need the most handling but offer great flexibility and low-cost storage. Finished product of excellent quality can be bought frozen and offers the greatest ease of handling, but at a higher cost. Frozen doughs come in an unproofed or oven-ready state. Unproofed product will require the additional steps of thawing and rising between freezer and oven. Oven-ready products are available that are parbaked or raw pre-proofed. Both types of product can go from freezer to oven.

Many operators are turning to local off-premise bakeries to supply their bread needs. This eliminates problems of additional labor, equipment, and storage space completely, and many bakeries are willing to make two deliveries daily to insure freshness. Smaller bakeries will also work with clients to adjust their product line or even design new, signature items.

Although bakeries represent the only alternative for some, operators will need to maintain strict quality controls when receiving product. According to Bill Dutton of Denver's Buckhorn Exchange, consistency is the biggest problem: "We're buying from four different bakeries to stay in control. Everybody brings by samples that are to die for, but quality and freshness often slip down the road." Nevertheless, Dutton feels the frustration is worth it because "we have an 85-seat dining room and a kitchen that isn't big enough to serve 45." Sound familiar?

The hidden disadvantage to bakery buying is that many vendors will require a minimum weekly purchase, and even if they do not require a standing daily order, an operator may quickly decide on one to eliminate the hassle of daily ordering. This lack of flexibility can lead to a problem of leftovers or, worse yet, shortages. Accurate forecasting of cover counts is essential to maintain a proper balance. For ordering purposes, figure on 1½ units (rolls or slices) per cover.

rector of public relations Michael Brandon explains, "We felt that the nine-grain loaf was more consistent with taste trends than the 'Texas Toast' that a lot of steak houses were serving. We're very satisfied with the results." The choice of a grain loaf fit in with a restructuring of the menu that de-emphasized beef in favor of foods that were perceived to be lighter. But, even with beef's restored image, the grain bread remains popular. The 7-oz. round loaf is served whole to tables of more than two people, and half a loaf is served to singles and deuces. Stuart Anderson's slices the bread part way through, like the Buckhorn Exchange does, but serves it from a warmer.

At The Pastaria in Nashville, owner Richard Mekdeci has developed a signature bread so distinctive that he has registered it as a trademark. Pesto Bread is a 6- x 8-in., 2-oz. sourdough mini-loaf that is flavored with basil pesto. One mini-loaf comes with each meal; additional loaves can be purchased à la carte. At 45¢ each, or 12 for $5, Mekdeci figures his cost to be about 50%, a figure he says he can live with because of the signature value.

Signature bread service does not have to stop at the bread basket. In fact, The Pastaria uses Pesto Bread to double as a distinctive sandwich bread for meatball subs and a vegetarian sandwich specialty. In fast-service restaurants, biscuits and English muffins are proving increasingly popular as alternative sandwich breads.

Convito Italiano in Chicago serves a toasted bread salad called Panzanella as a lunch entree for $6.95. Chunks of Italian bread are toasted and tossed with cucumber, tomato, red bell pepper, red onion, capers, garlic, olive oil, and red wine vinegar. Michela's chef Todd English serves a similar dish, a *crostini* made with a toasted round of walnut bread topped with chopped tomato, cucumbers, and red onion.

FLEXIBILITY. Operators who feature pizza can also easily convert pizza dough into focaccia—flatbreads that are seasoned with oil, garlic, and oregano and used for a meal accompaniment or an ingredient. In the *RB* Test Kitchen, we developed a focaccia hero using common Italian sandwich stuffers. As a substitute for homemade focaccia, Syrian bread can be marinated in bottled Italian dressing before being grilled; season with herbs, red pepper flakes, and salt.

Toasting oil- or butter-soaked bread cubes and slices is a good way to recycle leftovers for profit. Homemade croutons of this sort can be used for salads and soups, as an accompaniment for cheese, or served as an upscale topping. In the *RB* Test Kitchen, we paired croutons with smoky eggplant relish, roasted garlic, and chive-flavored cream cheese to make a hearty contemporary dish to be sold in the $4-$5 range at a bar, for a light lunch, or as an appetizer.

Leftover bread can also be turned into bread pudding, a humble country dish that can currently be found on the menus of many white-tablecloth restaurants. For a truly decadent version, try substituting leftover croissants for bread and adding cocoa powder to make a chocolate croissant pudding.